



WHEN I WAS THINKING of possible subjects for my first column

for *Take One*, I was startled to realize how many experimental filmmakers produce what are being referred to as handmade or handcrafted films—those created by working directly with the material of film. Techniques encompass hand-processing, colour toning, “cameraless” methods such as scratching, drawing and painting on the film with dyes and even homemade emulsion. Handmade films foreground the material, chemical surface of the film and the filmmaker’s unique artistry. These are particularly potent qualities in an increasingly homogenized and digital world.

Handmade films are not new. Most of the early avant-garde filmmakers came to film from other disciplines—Man Ray was a photographer, Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling were painters—and so techniques such as photograms and hand-painting were natural extensions of their work. Records of hand-painted films can be found as early as 1910, and Len Lye and Norman McLaren were making hand-painted films in the 1930s. In the past decade, there have been enough filmmakers working in this fashion both nationally and internationally that it can be seen as a trend. Toronto filmmaker Gariné Torossian makes intricate collages by cutting and taping different film formats together in layers (e.g., *Girl from Moushka*, 1993). Izabella Pruska-Oldenhof has made two photogram films (*Light Magic*, 2001; *Song of the Firefly*, 2002), in which objects placed on the film surface create the film image. In *her carnal longings* (2003) she explores the emulsion-lift technique, which involves lifting the emulsion off the film surface and re-adhering it. Calgary’s Richard Reeves (*Linear Dreams*, 1997; *1:1*, 2001) creates cameraless animations by drawing and scratching on the film surface, frame by frame, even going so far as to draw his soundtracks.

Much of the recent upsurge in handmade filmmaking in Canada, and particularly Toronto, can be attributed to Phil Hoffman and the week-long workshop he has been running on his farm in rural Ontario since 1994. The Independent Imaging Retreat (commonly known as the Film Farm) is a crash course in shooting, hand-processing, tinting and toning. Deirdre Logue, Christina Zeidler and Sarah Abbott are just a few of the experimental filmmakers whose films have been shaped by the workshop.

BEYOND THE FRINGE

BY LARISSA FAN

There are a number of reasons why handmade filmmaking has currently gained such prominence in the experimental film world. On a purely economic level, handmade films are cheap to make. More pertinently, they free the filmmaker from a reliance on film labs and services that are rapidly disappearing in the wake of digital technology. It’s clear that as analog technology becomes obsolete, experimental filmmakers, already masters of invention, will have to be increasingly self-reliant. A critique of mass-consumer culture and the drive toward technology is implicit in handmade filmmaking. Handcrafted films are by nature personal films, indelibly containing the mark of their maker in their idiosyncrasies and imperfections. Hand-processing, for example, results in scratches on the emulsion and patches of irregular development. There is a direct physical connection between the artist and the film itself, whether sloshing it about in a bucket of chemicals or painstakingly scratching through the emulsion. With their intimate connection to the body, artisanal processes reintegrate the physical senses into filmmaking for both the maker and viewer.

However, handmade filmmaking should not be viewed as a naive rejection of technology. Indeed, many filmmakers blend handcraft and digital technology as it suits their needs. Rather than drawing attention to the means of their construction, handmade films counteract the illusionism of mainstream cinema in much the same manner as other experimental strategies. And in a sea of mass production and cookie-cutter sequels, handmade films are an assertion of the importance of the small, the unique and the individual.